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ABSTRACT

Oregon's annual dropout rate increased from 6 percent in the 1992-93 school year to 7.4 percent in the 1994-95 school year. Some schools, however, managed to reduce their dropout rate. This report explores the strategies that worked for 15 Oregon high schools that reduced their dropout rate. Interviews were conducted with representatives of Oregon high schools that had reduced their dropout rate by 1.5 percent or more during the period from 1993-94 to 1994-95. The sample included 13 principals, 1 assistant principal, 2 teachers, 3 counselors, and 1 director of instruction. A portrait of each high school reveals its programs and other efforts on behalf of at-risk youth. Most schools with effective programs for assisting at-risk youth had two things in common: the school culture functioned as both a positive, supportive community and a "high-reliability" organization (Rossi and Stringfield 1995). (LMI)

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Dropout-Reduction Strategies in Oregon High Schools

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Karen Irmsher

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Preface

Oregon's annual dropout rate has increased steadily in recent years. In the 1992-93 school year, the rate was 6 percent. The following year it increased to 6.6 percent, and in 1994-95 it rose to 7.4 percent.

While the statewide statistics were edging up, some schools managed to reduce their dropout rate. How did they do it?

This Bulletin seeks to answer that question. With the exception of some very small schools, we contacted Oregon high schools that reduced their dropout rate by 1.5 percent or more from the 1993-94 school year to 1994-95. No school claimed to have a magic bullet, but all were exploring options that seemed to be working for them and might work well for other schools.

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Introduction

Schools looked at students differently during the era in which many current educators attended high school. Back then, all but the seriously disabled were expected to fit into the same program and to march stalwartly in step with their peers toward graduation. They either made it or they didn't. Of those who dropped out, few returned. Failures were the fault of the students, or their parents, not the schools. Our view of educational responsibility has broadened since then, and it's a good thing.

According to a 1991 report issued by the United States Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, by the year 2020 the majority of America's public school students will be living under conditions that place them at risk of educational failure. This is a projection, of course. But the trend toward ever higher percentages of poorly housed, malnourished, abused, and neglected children is inarguable.

In this report, researchers found that most schools with effective programs for assisting at-risk youth had two things in common. The school culture functioned as both a positive, supportive community and a "high-reliability organization" (Rossi and Stringfield). High-reliability organizations expect to succeed. These schools encourage open communication among all the stakeholders, and they go all out to find ways to help students whose needs are not being met.

It's a rare school that hasn't already reconfigured its offerings to provide the extra boost many students need to bolster their chances for academic success. Oregon's schools are no exception. Commonalities include increased flexibility of scheduling and alternative education options, more attention paid to school atmosphere and cultural diversity, and an all-out effort to encourage better communication among students, teachers, parents, administrators, and the community.

Schools that are succeeding at cutting their dropout rates aren't content with the status quo. They are constantly questioning, changing, and hustling to find out what they can do to help more of their students get off to a good start in these difficult times. Nobody has all the answers, but the varied strategies schools are trying statewide are well worth examining.

Portraits of High Schools That Reduced Their Dropout Rates

Oregon's schools haven't had the luxury of deciding whether they want to change. In the past five years they've been hit with a barrage of state-mandated directives and budget-cutting ballot measures. No school has escaped the impact of the 1991 Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century, or the budget cuts of Ballot Measure 5. And all fear the yet-to-be-determined damage of the Measure 47 budget-reduction ax.

But educators, for the most part, keep trying to do a better job at educating students, no matter what the odds. By at least one measure, the following schools have been successful despite these added challenges. All these schools decreased their dropout rates by at least 1.5 percent from 1993-94 to 1994-95, giving more young Oregonians a better chance at achieving their dreams. For that, these schools deserve a few minutes in the spotlight and a round of applause.

Canby High School

Canby School District, Canby

"When we looked at the 1993-94 data, we knew we had a problem," said Principal Jim Gadberry of Canby High School. The dropout rate that year was 7.3 percent, quite a jump from the previous year's 4.9 percent. In a small school, a rate change of that size might result from the choices of a handful of students, but Canby High is a large school with more than 1,300 students.

On-Campus Alternative School. Administrators decided to set up an on-campus alternative school for students who wanted to graduate but didn't

find the regular school environment conducive to learning. That program is now in its third year. Most students work on coursework in the alternative-education classroom for two or three periods a day. Students can earn credits for core classes, such as social studies, language arts, math, and some science. Many are integrated into regular elective classes, while a few spend the full school day there.

To get the program started, counselors were assigned the task of tracking down dropouts. Recouped basic education money from returned students provided the financial resources for staffing the new classroom. After making contact, the counselor encouraged the student to discuss the problems or frustrations that had led him or her to quit school. Together, the counselor, student, and interested family members explored possible plans for the future. If a student wanted to return to school, the counselor worked with the student and family to set up a personal education plan. Some students chose to re-enter the regular school, but often the alternative school seemed a more viable option.

In the first year, any student who had dropped out and wanted into the program could get in. But the staff quickly discovered that drug and alcohol problems interfered with success for a high percentage. Now counselors do a screening. Students who are still using may not be able to come.

"We suggest that they seek resources to help with that problem first," said Gadberry, "so they can better focus on their education. You have to prioritize which set of disenfranchised students you want to assist. We have a much more successful alternative-education program now."

ESL Program. A growing English as a Second Language program is helping students with language differences. Canby has large populations of both Russians and migrant Hispanics. The ESL teacher is Hispanic. The Russian students are generally bilingual. Their parents are Old Believers who adhere closely to their traditional culture. Hiring a Russian-speaking instructional assistant has been instrumental in helping a high percentage of these students stay in school long enough to get their diplomas. The aide meets with their parents in their homes and assists with studies if language is a barrier.

As far as school atmosphere goes, Gadberry said he encourages an awareness of changing socioeconomic factors in his staff, and he fosters a school climate of caring and consideration.

Canby High School's dropout rate declined from 7.3 percent in 1993-94 to 3.4 percent in 1994-95. Gadberry said he is pleased with the decrease in dropouts, but concerned about the future. "We know the programs we're putting in place are having good effects, but there are larger factors outside of the school affecting us. With the new limits imposed by Measure 47, we

don't know if we'll be able to keep the programs we have."

Glencoe High School

Hillsboro Union High School District, Hillsboro

"The biggest thing we're doing," said head counselor Ken Skipper, "is tracking kids much better, making contact with kids that leave, and being a lot more aware of where they are going."

Glencoe High School, with a school population of about 1,400, is located in Hillsboro, northwest of Portland. Its dropout rate fell from 10.3 percent in 1993-94 to 8.5 percent in 1994-95.

Tracking Dropouts. Glencoe has a high percentage of migrant Hispanics. Sometimes the hardest part is getting a phone number. But contacts made by the staff have been well worth the effort.

"Some of these kids, you can't do anything with. They don't want to go back to school," said Skipper. "But we found that a lot of these kids are not really dropouts."

Some students transfer to another high school but never request records. Or maybe a student went on to take classes at Portland Community College or some other educational-training program. If the student is attending school, even though it's not at Glencoe, that student isn't counted as a dropout, so the mere act of gathering followup information generally results in a lowered dropout rate.

"Often it's simply a reporting issue," noted Skipper. "We've worked really hard at developing a relationship with Portland Community College and other community colleges, so we can get lists of our students who are now attending. That's not always easy. Recently we got a list of seventeen of our former students we didn't know were there."

"We work really hard on verifying transfers to other schools. If a kid says, 'I'm moving to Prineville,' we call Prineville to see if they made it or not. But if they go back to Mexico, they have to be counted as dropouts. Even our best kids will probably finish up somewhere."

Some of the dropout-tracking process is ongoing, but counselors also make two big pushes each year. In preparation for the state's "Early Leaver Report," due in October, they gather preliminary data in early spring, see who's listed, and try to contact those students. In September they rerun the report to see who's still on it, and make another big effort to bring them back.

When making contact with students who truly have dropped out, counselors at Glencoe bend over backward to come up with an educational program that will suit the students' needs well enough to get them back in a

school. Districtwide programs include an alternative school, a Twilight School program, and a district outreach program. The Glencoe campus itself offers a credit-recovery class, an evening GED-prep program, Hispanic migrant support, and a work-experience program. High School Completion and GED-prep programs at Portland Community College are yet another avenue for educational re-entry.

Alternative School. The off-campus alternative school, located at the Miller Educational Center, serves up to forty students at a time from the Hillsboro School District. Classes are smaller, students work at their own speed, and more individual attention is available than in the standard high school setting. Students come in the morning and stay all day.

Twilight School. This districtwide program provides students with an opportunity to make up credits they need to graduate. Some are still in school, but have fallen behind in a class or two. Others have dropped out of regular school. Students commit to attending one of three sessions every day: 1-3 p.m., 3-5 p.m., or 5:30-7:30 p.m. Regular attendance and demonstrable progress are required to stay in the program, and there's usually a waiting list to get in. Teachers in this program work with other teachers in the district to develop packets of learning materials. Moving through the packets at their own speed, students can earn credits for all required classes as well as some electives.

Outreach Program. Also serving the entire district, this is the most flexible program of all. Based at the alternative school, the staff member who fills the role of outreach cordinator is authorized to build individualized programs to help students graduate. He works with the early-leaver report and attempts to make contact with dropouts throughout the year. If he finds a student, for instance, who wants to get a degree but works during the Twilight Program hours or doesn't have the capability to work a packet independently, he can set up a contract situation designed specifically for that student's needs. He might even develop a course himself, let the student take materials home, and monitor that student's progress.

Credit-Recovery Program. On the Glencoe High School campus, a credit-recovery program is offered two periods a day. Students work on packets individually, just as they do in the Twilight School. The main difference is that this is a regular class anyone can sign up for. One is first period and another is offered eighth period. Some students are attending school the rest of the day on campus. Some are no longer in school, except for this class. They may have failed one or two required classes and just need to pick

up those credits to graduate. Some may only need two or three classes to finish, so they attend school for a couple periods in the morning or a couple in the afternoon, in addition to the credit-recovery class.

Students can also opt for an evening GED-prep program on campus. For this one, they don't have to commit to regular attendance. Working at their own rate, they come when they can.

Work Experience. A program that offers credit for work experience entices some students back. Often these students are already employed. In cases such as these, school staff members work with the student's employer, looking for work activities that are educationally sound in terms of the student's development.

"We like to have them taking a class that relates to their work," said Skipper, "such as taking an accounting class and working in a business, or taking our food services block and working at McDonald's."

Migrant Support. Federal funding provides a variety of added supports for Hispanic migrants. New migrants from Mexico can take a transitional class that helps them learn about the school culture. Extra counseling and training, along with classes in study skills and English as a Second Language, are also available. The biology class has a Spanish-speaking aide, and one global-studies class is taught in Spanish. Aides accompany Spanish-speaking students to some of their classes.

All the above programs are free. But some students, especially those who've been out of school for a couple years, feel better about moving on to Portland Community College, despite having to pay tuition there. Even in this situation, the high school continues to offer assistance through age twenty-one.

"They may have been out of school, working at McDonald's for a while, and now they're ready for training. They only have to come up with money for the first term. If they pass, at the end of that term we'll write them a check that they can use for the second term," said Skipper.

Hermiston High School

Hermiston School District, Hermiston

"Our dropout increase was a one-year shot, and our improvement was a one-year shot," said Principal Dave Ego, of Hermiston High School.

In 1992-93 the dropout rate was 7.8 percent, climbing to 9.1 percent

the next year and sinking back to 6.74 percent in 1994-95. The student population hovers close to 1,100.

When attendance becomes erratic, the Umatilla-Morrow ESD sends what Ego describes as "a nicer, kinder truant officer" to talk with students and their parents. School counselors meet with students who are failing but still attending and can suggest a variety of alternative programs to fit the students' increasingly varied needs. These include packets, alternative school, English Skills Center, Oregon PASS program, Blue Mountain Community College, and the Oregon National Guard's Youth Challenge Program. The school also changed to a four-period block schedule in 1995-96.

Ego couldn't say for certain that any one dropout-reduction strategy, or even the combination of strategies, was responsible for the decrease. In fact, some of the changes (block scheduling, in particular) weren't put into place until after the dropout rate had improved. But Ego is certain the school's increased flexibility has made it easier for more students to continue and complete their education.

Packets for Individualized Study. Students who fail subjects are no longer required to sit through classes again. Now they can work through a packet that covers the same material, and do it at their own speed. Packets, developed in most cases by teachers who teach the classes, are available in almost all subject areas, with the exception of math. Only students who have been through a class already can earn credit through completing a packet.

"It took a lot of time to get those packets together," said Ego. "They mirror closely what our planned course statement says. Teachers got some curriculum time to develop them."

Focus Period. In addition to a summer-school option for working through packets, students can get help during their daily focus period. Thirty-two minutes in length, the focus period is sandwiched between the A and B blocks. Each student is assigned to a classroom during focus time, but teachers can issue passes to other locations. Sanctioned uses of time include study, working on packets, making up tests or labs, library research, working on career portfolios, and attending meetings.

Ideally, a student stays with the same focus-period teacher for four years, but students or teachers can request a switch if desired. Class members are all at the same grade level. Ego sees the focus period as one of the big benefits to come out of block scheduling. In addition to the built-in study, research, and make-up times, it allows teachers to actually serve as mentors as well as teachers. "Teachers have found they have a different kind of relationship with some of their students now," said Ego.

Migrant students don't always have to fail a class first before switch-

ing to a packet. They have the option of earning credit through the Oregon PASS program (Portable Assisted Secondary Studies). A fee is charged for each packet of this commercially developed bilingual program, which allows them to complete work even when their family has to move on.

Alternative School. Students who may benefit from a change of location can be referred to the alternative school. Located at a separate site, it serves students from Umatilla, Stanfield, and Echo High Schools, as well as Hermiston. If unsuccessful there, they may be referred back to Hermiston and placed in the behavioral-management classroom.

One teacher and two aides teach the six to seventeen students enrolled in this program, which includes a strong counseling component. They, too, work through packets. Some are mainstreamed into regular classes for part of their day.

"Dropouts aren't always students who are struggling with academics because of intelligence," Ego noted. "Some are just bored."

Specialized Study. Independent and advanced studies are one option for these students. This year, about twenty-eight students are working on projects in special-interest areas such as science, Latin, advanced writing, and genetics. Students work together with a teacher who is willing to help develop an independant course of study and supervise progress. Both student and teacher sign a contract.

Through a program with Blue Mountain Community College, talented-and-gifted students have a choice of thirty-four different classes in which they can earn college credit. Job-shadowing opportunities allow them to explore areas of potential interest.

Computer technology has also helped maintain student interest. All classrooms are networked to the Internet and have e-mail capability. Classrooms have from one to fourteen access points. At some point, every student has assignments that require him or her to use the Internet. In the language-arts area, every classroom comes equipped with a full set of laptop word processors. That's eleven sets in all.

"This has improved the quality of written work," said Ego. The school requested waivers on textbook adoptions at various times to get funding for the machines and software.

Last, but certainly not least, varied teaching strategies have gone a long way toward piquing student interest and reaching students with diverse learning styles. "Our district is pretty progressive in regard to staff development," said Ego.

Hidden Valley High School

Three Rivers/Josephine County School District, Grants Pass

"I don't have the slightest idea what caused the drop," admitted Carl Johnson, principal of Hidden Valley High School.

His school went from a dropout rate of 9.8 percent in the 1993-94 school year to 6.7 percent in 1994-95, a substantial drop in a student population that has risen from 737 to 866 in the past few years. But Johnson fears the rate is heading back up this year.

A possible explanation for the decrease is the school's increased effort at contacting dropouts and potential dropouts. Teachers and administrators share the responsibility for making calls at the beginning of each school year. The rest of the year, one of the vice-principals calls the student's parents when he or she has missed five days.

"This is our third year on the block schedule," said Johnson. "When you miss one day, it's like missing two. It's very easy to get discouraged when you're two days behind. Students are beginning to see the impact of missed days. It catches up to them fast. If we don't get on them right away, it gets to be ten days and we drop them automatically. They have to re-enroll to come back, and by then they would be twenty days behind, probably too much to catch up. "

Students who have been sick get two days to make up work for each day missed. Those who miss five days without an excuse are required to come to Saturday school until they get caught up. Saturday school is run like a study hall, with two teachers to assist students as needed.

Johnson has high hopes for the new Phone Master system, set to go online the beginning of 1997. When a student misses a class or classes, that information is fed into the system and the Phone Master system automatically calls parents that evening.

"We talked to some schools who were using the Phone Master system," said Johnson, "and they seemed to think that this really was a positive thing for them."

Jefferson High School

Portland School District, Portland

"I'm convinced it's not any one thing you do," said Principal Alcena Boozer. "It's a combination of factors. I suspect what works best is different for each kid."

Jefferson High School's 7.3 percent dropout rate in 1994-95 was a

stunning dive from the previous year's 13.4 percent. With a student population that hovers around the 1,100 mark, Jefferson is the smallest public high school in the Portland School District, but one of the most transient and culturally diverse. Approximately a third of the students who start school in the fall are no longer attending by June.

"Students may live with mom for a while, live with dad for a while, and move a lot. Some kids are already living on their own," Boozer noted. This year, 59 percent are African Americans, 8-10 percent are Hispanic. Another 10 percent are Asian and the rest are European Americans with a strong Russian and Albanian presence.

"At one point," Boozer recalled, "our soccer team spoke five languages and English wasn't one of them."

Boozer views the school's cultural mix as both healthy and challenging. Student-retention strategies here are as varied as the population. Social services, community groups, and other outside supports play a big role, as do magnet programs and a transitional classroom for students who enter midterm.

Transitional Class. One of the school's most recent innovations, the transitional class is a response to problems created by block scheduling. Jefferson is in its fourth year on a block schedule, a change that has been well received for the most part. Every nine weeks a new quarter begins, and students can now earn eight credits a year instead of the six that were possible before the block. The schedule generally works out well for most students who start at the beginning, but students entering midterm have found it difficult to catch up.

Frequently these students have multiple problems in their lives, Boozer noted. The goal of the transitional class is to get them stabilized so they can focus on their studies. Many have a history of coming in and out of alternative programs. During the intake process, the teacher-coordinator uses both diagnostic testing and interviews to discover impediments, academic and otherwise, that may interfere with academic progress. The teacher helps connect the student with appropriate social-service agencies, while helping the individual work through learning packets geared to his or her needs.

The school has also worked hard to nurture strong collaborative relationships with a number of community-based programs dedicated to helping disadvantaged students succeed. These groups include I Have a Dream, Self-Enhancement, Inc., the Urban League, and Da Da Kidago (Swahili for "little sister").

Special Programs. Open to all, specialized inhouse programs hold the interest of many students who might otherwise leave school. These

include the Financial Services Academy, the Performing Arts Magnet, and a newer Health Services and Biotechnology Magnet.

One of the school's oldest specialized programs, the Financial Services Academy, seeks to prepare students directly for careers in the financial-services industry. Students enter as sophomores and take classes together as a cadre. Each student has a mentor. Off-campus experiences include job shadowing and internship opportunities. A staff/community advisory committee helps revise the curriculum as needed.

Students in the performing-arts program can specialize in instrumental music, dance, theater, or television. The popular Jefferson Dancers, who perform statewide, are the best-known performance group of this magnet program.

Health Services and Biotechnology is a new magnet program this year. A year and a half into a three-year federal grant, the program links the high school with several feeder middle schools. Students agree to take on a heavier than average curriculum, learning about and interning in health services in addition to meeting the basic curriculum requirements.

"The goal," said Boozer, "is to offer a wide array of opportunities to young people in which the instruction is contextual. The expectation is that all students have the capability of being successful if you can find the right niche for them. We try to match learning styles and interests with instructional styles and programs. We've found you can do a great deal in terms of all those variables, but what a lot of it boils down to is the relationship between the teachers and the learners." Boozer has observed that students will generally try a lot harder when patient, caring, enthusiastic individuals work with them.

"If you're willing to take the risk of looking around to find support, you can find people in the community who come up with very creative solutions. People here tend to work very hard and be very creative. Some have become foster parents to kids they were helping. Some teachers stay late or come back in the evenings to open labs or help students with essays when they're getting close to the end of their high school experience."

Despite the wide variety of offerings and substantial community support, some students may do better finishing in an off-site alternative school. Boozer says Jefferson has good working relationships with alternative programs and doesn't view them as competitors.

While proud of her school's success at helping students stay in school, Boozer said she fears the future.

"I'm concerned that our rate is going to go back up in the light of Ballot Measure 47 and cuts we've already had. All Portland schools lost significant staffing last year, administrators and teachers. And now we're

going to lose more. What we're doing now is looking to the state legislature, hoping they'll come forward with some funding."

Klamath High School

Klamath Union and Mazama High School District, Klamath Falls

"We're certainly doing some things to decrease the dropout rate," said Principal Kenneth Womer, "but a lot of it we didn't start doing until after we got the improvement. I don't know that we do anything very innovative or exciting compared to other areas of the state."

This school's student population hovers around 1,000. In the 1992-93 school year, the dropout rate was 6.2 percent. It shot up to 10.1 percent in 1993-94, then plummeted to 3.8 percent in 1994-95.

"That year we made a big difference, we got a lot of kids back," said Womer. "We had counselors make contact. But that wasn't anything different from what we had done in the past. It could have been artificially high that one year. I was new and we also had a new vice principal in charge of discipline. We came in knowing things had to change and we may have caused a lot of kids to leave. We did more expulsions and those kinds of things."

Finding out what students need to stay in, or return to school, is the key to helping more of them to graduate.

"We try to reach every kid before they go out the door, change teachers, reduce their schedule if they need it. Whatever we can do to keep them in school, as long as they aren't violent or using or selling drugs. If they leave, we make phone calls or even go out to their homes, talk to them, let them know we want them back. We try to build a relationship with the kids. Try to tell them the truth. Your life's going one way and we can see it."

Specialized programs at Klamath include the Individualized Instruction Program, Saturday School, and the Interpersonal Success Seminar.

Students in the Individualized Instruction Program work through study packets to complete failed courses. They meet during regular school hours in a classroom staffed by a teacher and an aide. Materials are adaptations of packets purchased from Portland State University.

Saturday School, three hours on Saturday morning, is for students who skip class or are tardy. It's basically a study hall. Womer would like to see this program phased out and something more positive put in its place.

"Only about half come," he noted. "If he's not going to show up Monday through Friday, why is he going to show up on Saturday? I think it's kind of a negative."

Personal Skills. The Interpersonal Success Seminar (formerly called the inhouse suspension room) is a no-credit class that helps students develop the personal skills they need to reenter classes and succeed. It serves students with behavior problems, and those who skip Saturday school. Instead of suspending them to home, they attend this class. Often they have no one at home, so simply suspending them is not beneficial to their development. As many as twenty-five students may be in this class, staffed by a teacher and a full-time aide.

"They need to change their lives," said Womer, "not just get punished. We use it less as a detention room than as a treatment room, an opportunity for personal development. The kids get talked to and they are encouraged to talk about their issues." The teacher shows videos that teach personal skills, such as communication, anger management, decision-making, and so forth.

Pelican Wings is a program for ninth- and tenth-graders who've made some bad decisions. Assignment to this class is based on counselor referrals. Most students have shown a pattern of credit deficiency, behavior referrals, and poor attendance. Two periods a week the focus is personal development, two periods a week are devoted to tutoring, and one period a week is community service.

"This class really works," said Womer. "These students need help in dealing with issues of internal and external control, responsibility and accountability, and goal setting. Many of them aren't getting it at home."

Basketball. The Noon Basketball Association reaches yet another set of students. Sixteen teams of students participate, playing twelve-minute games. This high-energy program is run like the National Basketball Association, complete with t-shirts, standings, playoffs, finals, and trophies. Students can't play if they're suspended.

"For many students, this is their glory time," said Womer. "It gives them an opportunity to shine."

Cross-Age Tutoring. In January 1996, the school started a program of cross-age tutoring, sending freshmen and sophomores to help out at the elementary school. The tutors are trained to talk to the younger students about working hard and giving it their best. Both the younger and older students build self-esteem in the process. Along these same lines, Womer has another program idea in the works that would allow students to earn one-half credit for every seventy-two hours of community volunteer work.

Students also have the option of attending Klamath Institute, an off-site school run by the Jackson County ESD, to earn a diploma or GED. Those who continue their education at the institute are not considered dropouts.

For students battling drug and alcohol addiction, the school contracts with an outside counselor who provides group meetings and individual counseling on campus.

"You've got to ask yourself, 'Who are the kids and what do they need?' If a kid is coming to us and he's alcohol or drug affected, and has no idea what hard work or honesty are, we're really kidding ourselves to think we can help him much without dealing with these issues. We need to teach them what hard work is and that taking other people's things is wrong. If we don't teach them that, they're not going to make it; a diploma isn't going to do them much good."

La Pine High School

Bend-La Pine School District, Bend

"When you're small," noted Principal Rick Barber, "every student makes a difference."

La Pine High School's student population this year is about 380. In the 1992-93 school year, its dropout rate was 2.2 percent. The rate bounced up to 5.1 percent in 1993-94, then dropped again the next year to 1.7 percent.

"We just had one bad year in the middle," said Barber. "We could go through a period of time doing all the same things we're doing and have a horrendous dropout rate. So much depends on the kids and what they're going through at home. A lot of it is just plain luck."

The school's two main dropout-reduction strategies boil down to increased emphasis on scheduling exit conferences, and creating alternative educational opportunities to meet students' needs.

"Our community is low on the socioeconomic scale. Students are very transient and mobile. Anytime they let us know that they're thinking about moving or leaving, we try to schedule a conference—try to find a program that will work for them."

The Student Evaluation Team, dubbed the SET team, makes decisions related to placements in alternative educational programs. The team also makes outside referrals, such as those to mental-health agencies or drug and alcohol treatment programs. Team members include a school counselor, the special-education teacher, the school psychiatrist, an administrator, and two regular classroom teachers.

Opportunity Room. One option is the Opportunity Room, an on-campus alternative classroom staffed four periods a day by teacher/counselor

BULLETIN IN BRIEF

OREGON SCHOOL STUDY COUNCIL

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Dropout-Reduction Strategies in Oregon High Schools

By Karen Irmsher

Back when many current educators went through high school, failures were viewed as being the fault of the students or their parents, not the schools. Our view of educational responsibility has broadened since then, and it's a good thing.

A 1991 report issued by the United States Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement states that by the year 2020 the majority of America's public school students will be living under conditions that place them at risk of educational failure. This is a projection, of course. But the trend toward ever higher percentages of poorly housed, malnourished, abused, and neglected children is inarguable.

In the report, researchers found that most schools with effective programs for assisting at-risk youth had two things in common. The school culture functioned as both a supportive community and a "high-reliability organization." High-reliability organizations expect to succeed, and they go all out to find ways to help students whose needs are not being met.

Dropout Reduction in Oregon

In the 1992-93 school year, the state's dropout rate was 6 percent. By 1994-95 it had risen to 7.4 percent. At the same time, the rates at some schools went down. How did they do it? This Bulletin seeks to answer that question.

Making the Best of Mandated Changes

In the past five years Oregon schools have been hit with a barrage of state-mandated directives and budget-cutting ballot measures. No school has escaped the impact of the 1991 Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century, or the budget cuts of Ballot Measures 5. And all fear the yet-to-be-determined damage of the Measure 47 budget-reduction ax.

But educators, for the most part, keep trying to do a better job at educating students, no matter what the odds. By at least one measure, the following schools have been successful despite these added challenges. All have seen their dropout rates decline by 1.5 percent or more from 1993-94 to 1994-95.

Glencoe High School

"The biggest thing we're doing," said head counselor Ken Skipper, "is tracking kids much better. We found that a lot of these kids are not really dropouts."

Counselors make two big pushes each year. In preparation for the state's "Early Leaver Report," due in October, they gather data in early spring and try to contact those nonenrolled students. In September they see who's still on the report and make another concerted effort to bring them back.

Counselors work hard to come up with educational programs that suit the students' needs. Districtwide programs include an alternative school, a Twilight School program, and a district outreach program. The Glencoe cam-

The Oregon School Study Council—an organization of member school districts in the state—is a service of the College of Education, University of Oregon.

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pus itself offers a credit-recovery class, an evening GED-prep program, Hispanic migrant support, and a work-experience program.

Hermiston High School

Students who fail subjects are no longer required to sit through classes again, said Principal Dave Ego. Now they can work through a packet that covers the same material, and do it at their own speed.

Students can also get help during their daily focus period. Each student is assigned to a classroom, but teachers can issue passes to other locations for studying, working on packets, making up tests or labs, conducting research in the library, working on career portfolios, and attending meetings.

Jefferson High School

"I suspect what works best is different for each kid," said Principal Alcena Boozer.

Specialized programs hold the interest of many students who might otherwise leave school. These include the Financial Services Academy, Performing Arts Magnet, and new Health Services and Biotechnology Magnet.

With the school on a block schedule, students who enter in the middle of the term have found it difficult to catch up. The transitional class seeks to get them stabilized so they can focus on their studies. Many have a history of passing in and out of alternative programs. Through diagnostic testing and interviews, the teacher-coordinator discovers impediments, academic and otherwise, to academic progress. The teacher helps connect students with appropriate social-service agencies while helping individuals work through learning packets tailored to their needs.

The school also nurtures strong collaborative relationships with a number of community-based programs dedicated to helping disadvantaged students succeed. These groups include I Have a Dream, Self-Enhancement, Inc., the Urban League, and Da Da Kidago (Swahili for "little sister").

Klamath High School

The Interpersonal Success Seminar is a no-credit class that helps students develop the personal skills they need to reenter classes and succeed. It serves students with behavior problems. Instead of suspending them to home, they attend this class.

"They need to change their lives," said Principal Kenneth Womer, "not just get punished. We use it less as a detention room than as an opportunity for personal development. The kids get talked to and they are encouraged to talk about their issues." Students work on personal skills such as communication, anger management, decision-making, and so forth.

The Noon Basketball Association reaches another set of students. Sixteen teams of students participate, playing twelve-minute games. This high-energy program is run like the National Basketball Association, complete with t-shirts, standings, playoffs, finals, and trophies. Students can't play if they're suspended.

"For many students, this is their glory time," said Womer. "It gives them an opportunity to shine."

Madras High School

This school has expanded alternative-education options for students, with a major focus on tailoring programs to meet the needs of the school's unique ethnic mix.

Three years ago the district identified twenty freshman and sophomore Native Americans as being at risk of academic failure. These students now attend school half-day on the Warm Springs Reservation and half-day at Madras High.

The Junior Reserved Officers Training Corps, contracted through the U.S. Army, has helped provide a much-needed sense of identity for many students. Now serving 120, the program provides students with a positive alternative to gang affiliation.

"These kids are not star athletes and not criminals. They could go either way," said Principal Ken Cantrell.

McNary High School

The CE2 (Community Experiences for Career Education) program serves juniors and seniors at risk of dropping out. Students work in community placements three days a week, four hours a day, and attend school two days a week, working through packets that cover core high school subjects. Larry Hayward is in charge of the program.

"They come in as juniors, behind in credits and with a history of failing grades," said Larry

Hayward, who is in charge of the program. "So many of these kids come from really troubled home lives that counseling ends up being a big part of the job. We work on communication skills and help them feel good about themselves. We try to match students with their interests. If they don't have an interest, we like them to sample a variety of jobs so maybe they'll hit on something they find interesting."

At each new job site, they have an interview, which is then evaluated. Work placements last from three weeks to two months. Businesses include clothing stores, insurance agencies, nurseries, child-care centers, homes for the elderly, business offices, and schools.

ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL

"On time. On task. And on a mission," said Principal Paul Coakley. "We've kind of rallied behind that saying. It's the same in the world of work. You need to be on time. You need to stay on task, not just show up there. And your mission is to be the best that you can possibly be. Every time I come before them, I talk about how attendance and academic excellence go hand in hand."

All freshmen take a careers-survey class that helps them decide which of the school's six pathways they want to explore: natural-resources systems, business and management, health services, manufacturing and technology, arts and communication, and human services. Freshmen do one job shadow and must choose their pathway by spring. They learn how to dress, what to write down, why to be on time, and how to call prospective employers to set up an appointment.

Sophomores do two job shadows. By the time they are juniors and seniors, many students are ready for internships.

THE DALLES HIGH SCHOOL

Teen mothers get plenty of support for staying in school through the daycare facility, located four blocks from the campus. Principal Dave Beasley said that the free program provides full-time daycare for children from six weeks to two-and-one-half years of age. High school students have first priority access and can use it until they are twenty-one.

Hispanic students are integrated into the regular classes but also spend one period a day in an English as a Second Language program. And the school has recently started a class called "Spanish for Hispanics," in which they learn to read and write their own language.

"Over the last couple years, we've tried to dramatically increase contact between the home and the schools," said Beasley. "I even make home calls."

WILLAMINA HIGH SCHOOL

The school's new teen-parent program is a partnership among a local child-care provider, Adult and Family Services Division, and other public agencies that oversee child welfare. Babies receive child care, but not on campus. Their mothers may be in the regular school program, the alternative program, or a mixture of the two.

"I guess flexibility is our middle name on that one," said Principal Donald Yates. "We get everyone together and see what's in the best interest with all the individual circumstances."

Willamina has a significant Native American population. Most are members of the Grand Ronde Confederated Tribes, which owns and operates the Spirit Mountain Casino. Administrators work with the tribal leadership to provide programs, such as the tribal youth-employment program. The school and the tribal leadership work cooperatively to find the placement that makes the most sense for each individual.

Students have access to mental-health services and a county health clinic with an emphasis on preventing teen pregnancies. The clinic does pregnancy testing and refers sexually active students to the county or a physician, but doesn't dispense birth control. An advisory committee of community members and clergy helps set policy.

WOODBURN HIGH SCHOOL

New this year is an English Transition Program.

Principal John Lahley said, "We have an awful lot of kids who are extremely bright in math or science or other courses and can communicate well in English, but if you get into a lengthy discussion they get lost. For someone to comprehend a language fully takes five to seven years. In this program we try to take

some things and break them down a little differently. We make the effort to teach classes in a little more understandable language.

"One transition class is available in each of the core areas. These classes are taught in English, but students can ask for translations when they get in over their heads."

[The Bulletin also covers the dropout-reduction strategies of five additional high schools: Canby, Hidden Valley, La Pine, Pendleton, and Scappoose.]

CONCLUSION

Oregon's high schools have become more flexible. Educators no longer turn their backs on students who are failing. They dialogue with students, parents, and their communities. They are asking, What do you need to succeed? and How can we give it to you?

Schedules have loosened up. Block scheduling is common, and there's an openness to individual adaptations. Afternoon, evening, and alternative programs serve students whose circumstances don't mesh well with the regular school.

In response to deficits in personal and interpersonal skills traditionally taught in the home, many schools have developed curricula to build self-esteem and teach skills in communication, problem-solving, and goal-setting. Counseling and other services are often available for students with complex problems such as teenage parenthood and substance abuse.

With these adaptations, former and potential dropouts in Oregon today probably have a better shot at success than at any time in the past.

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David DeForest and his wife Jakki. DeForest said that staffing the area with his wife has worked out well.

"It's kind of a mom and pop kind of situation," said DeForest. "We do a lot of parenting. If one of us can't reach a student, the other one usually can."

Class size averages about twenty. No student may be in the alternative classroom more than two periods a day, the goal being total reintegration into regular classes. Some, but certainly not all, have academic and/or behavior problems. Students may be midsemester transfers from another district or re-entering after completing a substance-abuse treatment program. La Pine's modified block schedule makes it difficult, if not impossible, to pass a class without attending for most of the trimester. A sprinkling of high-achievers take Opportunity Room classes to earn packet credit for a course that they can't fit in due to scheduling conflicts.

Time-Out Room. The DeForests also staff the time-out room, which is adjacent to the Opportunity Room. Students come here through referral, or they may self-select this option.

"It's a place to cool off," said David DeForest. "If a student is having a hard time in a classroom, maybe blowing up at a teacher, he can come in here. We have him fill out a debriefing form describing what the problem was, what the student did, and what he could have done differently." Students can come in up to three times a trimester. More than that results in a referral to the SET team.

Students gain academic credit through packets, or they can receive help in completing assignments for other classes. Those who need it learn social skills such as anger management, respecting others, communication skills, and decision-making. Credit is also available through Plato courses in math, science, and English on the room's lone computer.

Afternoon School. Meeting daily from 2:45 to 4:30 p.m., afternoon school is another option. Some students just come to the afternoon school, while others are still enrolled in the regular school. Students can get tutoring help here for their work in other classes. This program is staffed by regular teachers.

"Teachers don't mind doing it," said Barber. "We took some of our extra-duty contract money and dedicated it to this."

Teen moms have their own program, located on campus but in a building separated from the rest of the school by a parking lot. Onsite childcare is provided for their babies. Six to eight young mothers attend school all day, with breaks to feed their babies. Many are also integrated into regular classes. These, and selected other students, may opt to graduate with

the state-mandated twenty-two credits rather than the district-mandated twenty-five. They are expected to complete all core classes but fewer electives. Students who choose this option receive what's called a standard diploma, rather than the twenty-five-credit academic diploma.

For students who need to break away from peers in order to succeed, the district's offsite alternative school, located in Bend, may be the best choice.

Barber believes that changing from a block schedule to a modified block schedule has also had a major impact on the dropout rate. The block schedule was four ninety-minute blocks. Now classes are a little shorter, but not as short as the former forty-five-minute blocks. The major impetus for the change was a desire to offer students more choices.

"I think the overall feeling of students has improved. They like taking fewer classes at once. Kids have a better attitude. They're happier being at school. Most of them said the full block was just too long a time to sit in class."

Madras High School

Jefferson County School District, Madras

Madras High School's dropout rate was an abysmal 20.7 percent in 1991-92. Every year since then has seen major rate reductions, racheting down to 8.7 percent in 1994-95.

"We haven't done any one single splashy thing," said Keith Johnson, director of instruction for the Jefferson County School District. Nonetheless, the school's dropout-rate reduction is as impressive as it gets.

Principal Ken Cantrell said the biggest change was an expansion of alternative-education options for students, with a major focus on custom tailoring programs to meet the needs of the school's unique ethnic mix. Out of 740 students, 20 percent are Hispanic, 36 percent are Native American, and the rest Anglo.

Three years ago the district identified twenty freshman and sophomore Native Americans as being at risk of academic failure. Administrators redesigned their schedules, allowing them to attended school half day on the Warm Springs Reservation and half day at Madras High.

"A lot of these kids have difficulty even in their own community," said Cantrell, "but spending all day in a multicultural environment made it even harder. This works out a lot better for most of them. By helping these kids to be successful at a younger age, we could help them stay in school longer."

"We had nothing to lose by stepping outside of the box," said Johnson,

"and that's what we did. We took some risks and we tried to make them work."

Other strategies have included contacting students who leave early, using flexible scheduling, offering summer programs, tightening up on discipline, improving morale, starting a Junior ROTC program, going to a block schedule, offering alternative-education classes, and expanding ESL assistance.

Four years ago, all the counselors in the district began tracking down students who left school early. Some were going to other schools. That, in itself, helped cut the dropout rate. They invited others to return to school, working hard to negotiate workable programs for each individual. On discovering that the dropout rate began spiking up in the seventh and eighth grades, school administrators implemented a comprehensive guide program that matched each student with a teacher-mentor.

"Bottom-line research in effective learning shows that the relationship between the student and teacher is a major factor," said Johnson. "It all comes down to a belief that you make differences with kids by having a relationship with them."

Upper level students are no longer required to attend school all day. With the new block schedule, they have the option of attending eight periods every two days. Counselors work with each student to find the schedule that best fits his or her academic needs.

In coordination with the Warm Springs' Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council, the district now offers a summer program for Warm Springs youth. The council pays for the instructor while the school district provides materials, space, and program coordination.

Tighter Discipline. Improved discipline has been another major factor. Johnson credits Cantrell with greatly improving both discipline and morale since assuming the principalship three years ago.

"We were having an influx of emerging gangs," said Johnson. "Ken reinstated discipline and order in the high school. He let them know more clearly what our expectations of behavior were. Before he came, kids were often wandering the halls, using bad language, littering, and being disrespectful to teachers and each other. Basically, what he did was join with two other administrators in patrolling the halls every passing period. Teachers were encouraged to be in the halls too."

Students who broke the rules received warnings, then detentions, and finally, inschool suspensions—all-day confinement to a study hall with no passing periods or lunchroom privileges. Improving the school climate had become a concern of parents, the community, the city, and tribal officials, so the new behavioral expectations had wide support.

"One of the advantages of a small community like Jefferson County is that all the community entities work together," said Johnson. "Things have really turned around since four or five years ago. Morale improved, attendance improved, and the dropout rate decreased. The high school is now perceived as a safe place."

Junior ROTC Program. The Junior Reserved Officers Training Corps, a program contracted through the U.S. Army, has helped provide a much-needed sense of identity for many students. Now in its third year, the program started with 50 students and now serves 120.

"We wanted to give kids a different kind of gang to belong to, one that they can be proud of, "said Johnson. "These kids are not star athletes and not criminals. They could go either way. The program is remarkable at giving them leadership opportunities."

As one of a student's eight classes, ROTC has a curriculum that integrates history, sociology, citizenship training, and leadership. Students can wear their uniforms once a week. They provide the presentation of colors at football games, riding on horseback. Johnson and Cantrell believe theirs may be the only mounted color guard in the nation, and surely in the Northwest. Outside of class, ROTC members build teamwork through group activities such as rappelling off the grandstands, taking river-float trips, and taking part in ceremonies and drill competitions.

Some of the seniors who graduated last year with two years of training had made enormous gains in terms of leadership, public speaking, and relating to adults.

"This program has really generated a lot of enthusiasm and interest," said Cantrell. "Jefferson County is very proud of our ROTC."

The alternative-education classroom meets the needs of yet another set of students, primarily those who have not been academically successful. Located in a separate building on campus, students work at their own rate with one teacher providing direction and support.

Hispanic students now have the option of receiving primary instruction in Spanish for classes in physical science, biology, health, and math. The response to this has been positive.

Plans for next year include placing high school students in the elementary schools to work as classroom aides.

McNary High School

Salem-Keizer School District, Salem

"No kid walks out of my office feeling like a piece of garbage," said Allan Ball, assistant principal of McNary High School. "I probably spend more time talking with kids than most. A lot of kids don't think adults listen to them."

The school's 1993-94 dropout rate of 9.8 percent fell to 8 percent in 1994-95, Ball's first year at McNary. McNary High, with a student population exceeding 1,600, is one of three large high schools in the Salem-Keizer District. The ethnic mix is 85 percent Anglo, 10 percent Hispanic, and 5 percent other. About a dozen of those have strong Russian roots. As the only high school in the town of Keizer, which has a population of 25,000, the school has strong links to the community.

Ball said most of the school's students enjoy being at school, a factor researchers have found highly influential in dropout reduction.

"Here, the front door opens onto the commons. People who visit say, 'I open the door and I just feel comfortable.' Some of the schools I visit, they feel sterile and empty."

Student-recognition programs, such as the Breakfast of Champions, play a major role in keeping the focus positive. At this monthly breakfast, individual students, groups, and organizations receive recognition for extraordinary efforts. In nominating individuals for the Student of the Month award, teachers are encouraged to use broad criteria, rather than looking only at high academic achievement.

This is the school's second year on a block schedule, a change based partially on its track record of decreasing dropouts. Student attitudes have improved, Ball said, but it's too early to measure effects on the dropout rate.

The school also runs a number of alternative-education programs designed to meet the needs of students who might otherwise leave high school. These include Community Experiences for Career Education (CE2), an ESL program, and a packet program for freshmen and sophomores. Students can also complete their high school education off campus at the district's Barbara Roberts High School (offering GED completion, high school completion, a teen parent program, and a structured learning center for students with conduct disorders), or at Chemeketa Community College.

Career Education. The CE2 (Community Experiences for Career Education) program serves juniors and seniors at risk of dropping out. Students work in community placements three days a week for four hours a day. They spend the other two days in school, working on academics. Enrollment is limited to thirty. Half are juniors and half seniors, with from twelve to fifteen students in the classroom at a time. For academics, students work through packets that cover core high school subjects. Larry Hayward is in charge of the program.

"They come in as juniors, behind in credits and with a history of failing grades," siad Hayward. "Some may have behavior problems, but primarily it's grades. So many of these kids come from really troubled home lives, so counseling really ends up being a big part of the job. We work on communication skills and help them feel good about themselves. We try to match students with their interests. If they don't have an interest, we like them to sample a variety of jobs so maybe they'll hit on something they find interesting."

Training and practice related to interviewing are basic to the program. At each new job site, they have an interview, which is then evaluated. Work placements last from three weeks to two months. Hayward has a full-time assistant who manages the vocational aspects of the program. Initially, student placements were limited to eight work sites. Now that's up to fifty Keizer businesses, none in fast food. Types of businesses include clothing stores, insurance agencies, nurseries, child care centers, homes for the elderly, business offices, and schools. Students earn elective credit but are not paid. Some, however, do end up working for pay at their placement sites after school hours.

"We try to get them into occupations that someday they can really earn a substantial living doing," said Hayward. "We feel like we've been very successful. We're to a point now where about fifteen kids a year graduate from our program. That's almost everybody in the program, since half are usually juniors and half seniors."

"Students who get involved in this kind of program enjoy it, and it helps to motivate them in terms of pursuing their high school diploma. It's so much more real. They start to really look into their future and take some ownership in their education. For these kinds of kids, it's really important that they be ready for the world of work when they leave the classroom. We have quite a few kids who've been successful at landing a job and being accountable to a business."

Pendleton High School

Pendleton School District, Pendleton

"Attendance is a big flag," said Sue Kyte, senior counselor at Pendleton High School. "We start talking to kids pretty soon after we notice problems. We've been working a lot more with kids to help them understand that a high school diploma is a real necessity."

Pendleton High School, current enrollment over 700, had a dropout rate of 6 percent in 1992-93. It rose to 9.4 percent in 1993-94, and settled

back down to 6.5 percent in 1994-95. But Kyte said she can't put her finger on any changes that might have been responsible for either the rise or the fall.

Detention is the first step when a student's attendance becomes sporadic. Students can make up the time they've missed before school, after school, or on Saturdays. If that doesn't work, counselors work with the student and parents to draw up an attendance contract. After that, someone at the school contacts parents for any unexcused absence, no matter how short.

Students who get behind in credits can make them up in the district's off-site alternative school, or through the Basic Skills Department at Blue Mountain College. The alternative school offers core classes and a few electives, but no science or physical education, so most students go there for a half day and attend classes on the Pendleton campus half day. A few stay all day at the alternative school.

Other dropout-reduction strategies are based on creating a positive school environment and on offering programs tailored to students' individual needs and interests. Every student in the ninth grade takes a careers class where they research and plan possible careers, explore college possibilities, and learn to write resumés. Outside speakers come in to share their knowledge and experiences.

"We've got a leadership class that's been really strong in the past few years," said Kyte. "The group plans activities and gets kids involved. Some are traditional, but some are embellished, for instance, having a holiday feast at lunch time where students are served and have to make reservations." The group has also increased the number of assemblies, which has helped improve student morale.

A daycare center on campus provides childcare training for students interested in moving toward careers in early-childhood education. Set up through Head Start, it's free to participating families.

Moving to modified block scheduling in the 1995-96 school year was beneficial as well, Kyte said. Students attend all seven of their classes for forty-five minutes each on Mondays. On the other days they have four ninety-minute blocks. Two of those days they have a built-in tutorial during which they are responsible to the same teacher but can get passes to go to other teachers for help.

"This has helped the school atmosphere a lot," said Kyte.

Roosevelt High School

Portland School District, Portland

"We are trying to start a mind set at Roosevelt," said Principal Paul

Coakley. "On time. On task. And on a mission. We've kind of rallied behind that saying. We talk about it every day."

Roosevelt High School, located in Portland, is a racially and ethnically mixed school with more than 1,200 students. About 60 percent are of European descent, 11 percent African-American, 10 percent Asian (a mix of Hmoung, Vietnamese, and Laotian), 10 percent Hispanic, 5 percent Native American, and a sprinkling of others. The school's 1991-92 dropout rate of 15.2 percent fell to 10.7 percent in 1994-95. The strategies this school is using are well worth examining.

This is Coakley's second year at Roosevelt and he's enthusiastic about both the school and his job. Five years ago, when the school became concerned about its high dropout rate, the planning group focused on a goal of helping students become better prepared for the world of work, and on making their studies more relevant to their lives. Coakley believes that this focus has helped improve retention rates.

Exposure to Careers. All freshman are required to take a careers-survey class that helps them decide which of the school's six pathways they want to explore. The choices are Natural Resources Systems, Business and Management, Health Services, Manufacturing and Technology, Arts and Communication, and Human Services. Freshmen must do one job shadow (spend all day observing someone at work), and must choose their pathway by spring. At school, they learn how to dress, what to write down, and other employment skills, such as the importance of being on time and how to call prospective employers to set up an appointment.

Sophomores are required to do two job shadows, one in the spring and one in the fall. By the time they are juniors and seniors, many students are ready for internships.

"I think it's a really good program for getting kids to look at their futures," said Coakley. "The main component, here again, is attendance."

Coakley said that his ever-present motto (On Time, On Task, On a Mission) reflects that school-to-work focus.

"It's the same in the world of work," he said. "You need to be on time. You need to stay on task, not just show up there. And your mission is to be the best that you can possibly be."

Personal Contact. Coakley makes it a point to talk to the entire student body every other month. "They need to know who the principal is," he said. "I talk to them about what went well over the past two months, and what we need to work on. Like, if I see that paper all over the floor again, I'm going to take something away. Every time I come before them, I talk about how attendance and academic excellence go hand in hand.

"This morning we had our senior awards assembly. Tomorrow it will be juniors, and so on. We gave balloons to all the students who had perfect attendance. By doing that, I'm hoping to set a light so all the others see them. Perfect attendance begins to be something we're modeling, and something that the school is trying to promote."

A new attendance coordinator this year is in charge of keeping all statistics on tardies. Students who get three tardies in one week are assigned to thirty minutes of afternoon detention, on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

"I tell them, this is a place you don't want to be."

If attendance falls off, the attendance monitor calls the student's parents. When personal or family problems are a major factor, school personnel try to assist them in finding help. If parents express concern about their children's absences or tardies, those students may be given an attendance contract. They carry a sheet with them all day, asking teachers to sign it. Students receive incentives for improving their attendance.

"My philosophy is that we have to do everything we possibly can to help our young people be successful. Success breeds success. When the Blazers gave us some free tickets, we gave them to some of the kids who were doing well. Every time I come before them, I try to give them a pep talk. I tell them 'Our school wants to be the best school in the city, and it's you who can make us the best'."

Student Involvement. Student mediators are trained to help settle conflicts between students and teachers, students and students, and so forth. Another program matches senior boys and girls with freshmen. The older students are trained to talk with their younger peers in a positive manner, teaching them how to be successful in school. Other students tutor in the elementary schools.

"We're hoping that kids will see other kids in the high school early on and say, 'That's what I want to be'."

Parents play a major role in the Hispanic retention program. In Portland, according to Coakley, Hispanics and Native Americans have the highest dropout rate. In charge of the program at Roosevelt, Sonny Montes has covered the walls of the classroom with Spanish-language posters and pictures. Parent participation has been enthusiastic, with seventy parents attending the organizing meeting. Several days a week the Hispanic students can come in a classroom and get tutoring help in Spanish.

Coakley thinks school spirit has been another major factor in lowering the dropout rate. Last year the school's football team won the Portland Interscholastic League Community Championship for the first time in forty-five years. "Everybody loves a winner. It was nice. It gave us a lot of good pride in the community."

Scappoose High School

Scappoose School District, Scappoose

"I can probably tell you every kid in school that's dropped out and what they're doing," said Principal Pete McHugh. "We're still a small town so we're able to keep tabs on them and we've got very good counselors who are very good at following up."

Scappoose High School, enrollment 650, is the only high school in Scappoose, a community of 8,500 in Columbia County, northwest of Portland. Its dropout rate in 1992-93 was a scant 1.9 percent, climbing to 4 percent in 1993-94, and dropping back to 1.5 percent in 1994-95.

McHugh had no definitive explanation for the blip in the school's dropout rate, but the school does have an assortment of strategies for helping students stay in school long enough to graduate.

"I don't always see expulsion as being a negative thing," he said. "The way we have things set up here, every kid has to fit in the same size hole. Once a child is expelled, we have more options we can use."

Twilight School. One tack this school takes to accommodate students who aren't succeeding in other classes is Twilight School. From 4 to 6 p.m. each day, students who have been expelled, need tutoring, or have other problems can come to the Twilight School for help. Some are no longer attending regular classes. Some are there working on classroom assignments. Originally the program used the PASS packets used by Woodburn High School, but now teachers are being asked to divide their curriculum into weekly packets and develop them ahead of time.

"It's more flexible this way," said McHugh. "Right now we do the same thing, but teachers have to develop the packets as they go. We want to have them all done ahead of time. It will save us some money in the long run." For some students, however, the PASS packets are the best option.

Behavior Incentives. A new behavior-incentive program has created some excitement. Students are now recognized on a weekly and quarterly basis for attendance, citizenship, and academic achievements. Students accumulate points that make them eligible for drawings. The Lone Star Company, a local Scappoose business, has donated $2,000 per year for premiums. Students earn tickets for attendance, for high grades, for raising their quarterly or semester grade-point averages, for good behavior, and for outstanding contributions to the school. Each ticket increases a student's chances of winning a drawing.

"Each semester we give away big things like stereos, Blazer tickets,

and gift certificates from stores. We asked kids what motivates them. The number one thing that came up was informing parents of their good behavior. The number two thing was money. We can't actually give money, but we do give gift certificates."

The Dalles High School

The Dalles School District, The Dalles

"We don't have any magic bullet for these kids," said Principal Dave Beasley.

The Dalles High School, a 700-student school located in Wasco County, saw its dropout rate shoot up from 3.3 percent in 1992-93 to 7.5 percent in 1993-94, then settle back down to 5.3 percent in 1994-95.

"Don't put down why, because I don't know," cautioned Beasley. "The rates went back up the next year. It was an unusual event. Our alternative school and teen-moms programs have been in place for a long time. Maybe it was a combination of having the right kids being willing to take the programs."

Most, but not all, students in the alternative school take their core classes there, and they are integrated into the regular school for electives. The alternative school starts at the same time as the regular school, but goes an hour longer. Formerly off campus but recently relocated to a separate building on campus, it has a separate entrance and its own restroom facilities.

The Dalles (population over 11,000) has three high schools. "We exchange kids back and forth when we feel a change of venue is appropriate. If a student isn't making it socially in one building, we're willing to trade." This strategy is used frequently with students who return to school after going through a drug-and-alcohol-treatment program.

The school used to have its own drug-and-alcohol-treatment program, but lost it due to funding cuts. Now it contracts with Hood River Hospital for drug and alcohol services. Twice a week a specialist comes in for three hours to do individual assessments, work with students and parents, run a support group, and refer students to other sources for help.

"If they have insurance, there's a lot of sources, but if they're poor, they don't have that many options," Beasley lamented. "Our state is abandoning our children. Public schools are going to become warehouses for those who can't afford private schools. I try not to be a pessimist, but the taxpayers are helping me become one more and more."

Daycare Support. Teen mothers get plenty of support for staying in

school through the daycare facility, located four blocks from the campus. This free program provides full-time daycare for children from six weeks to two-and-one-half years of age. High school students have first-priority access to this free service and can use it until they are twenty-one. Young mothers attending Columbia Gorge Community College have second priority. The facility can hold eight children at a time. Some come in the morning and others attend in the afternoon, so more can be served. Regular students can earn elective credits there in early-childhood education. Teen mothers also receive counseling services through a grant from the Children's Trust Fund.

In the last five years, the school's minority population has mushroomed from 2 to 10 percent. The new students are primarily Hispanic and Samoan. Beasley said that the influx of Samoans contributed to the increased dropout rate in 1993-94.

"Many of them were out of the gangs in San Francisco. The younger kids are doing fine but the older ones didn't make the adjustment."

Hispanic students are integrated into the regular classes, but also spend one period a day in an English as a Second Language program. And the school has recently started a class called "Spanish for Hispanics," in which they learn to read and write their own language.

Block scheduling is in its third year. "It's been a godsend as far as maintaining behavior. Fights have declined because students spend less time in the halls. It's reduced our conflicts, locker thefts, and general kinds of cliquishness. I think it just improves the attitude of your class. Gives teachers a longer prep time, allows them more time to call parents. Being a teacher these days is quite a bit more complicated than it used to be."

Outreach to Parents. When it comes to attendance problems, administrators and counselors pull out all the stops. They call parents and visit them in their homes. A recently purchased phone-calling system automatically contacts parents whenever students miss classes.

"Over the last couple years, we've tried to dramatically increase contact between the home and the schools," said Beasley. "I even make home calls. Since I lost my drug-and-alcohol counselor, my other counselors don't have time."

Home tutoring is available for students who are chronically ill, pregnant, or expelled. The school has two tutors.

To maintain sports programs in the face of statewide budget cuts, Beasley has coordinated events and activities that raised $75,000 from outside donors. A newly established foundation makes tax donations deductible, and the local hospital is the largest contributor.

Beasley said he has high hopes for the new ropes course being built on

campus under the guidance and support of the U.S. National Guard. He thinks it will prove be an excellent self-esteem builder.

"That's probably the most exciting thing we've done. Everything you do with kids is designed to make them feel like they're part of the program, whether it's drama or speech or student government or whatever, it helps them feel like school is important and it's there for them. We want our kids to be involved. That's why we raise money for sports and plays."

Willamina High School

Willamina School District, Willamina

"I don't know that we're doing any one thing," said Principal Donald Yates. "With any one student, you can probably pick out one of these programs and say that this is what's most needed by this one student. We haven't set a target for reducing our dropout rate by a certain amount. We're just trying to do things for kids as we see the need, doing whatever we can, wherever we can."

Willamina High School is the only high school in Willamina, a town of 1,700 located in Yamhill County, northwest of Salem. Average income is on the low side, according to Yates. The area is primarily blue-collar, timber-dependent, and serves as a bedroom community for the Salem area. Student enrollment hovers around 300. In the past couple of years, the school has cut its dropout rate nearly in half, from 9.1 percent in 1992-93 to 4.3 percent in 1994-95.

"Blind luck," said Yates. "We're a really small school, so you can see radical statistical changes when you look at percentages. While I'm pleased with our numbers, I would expect that our numbers a year from now could be back up with the average Oregon school."

Alternative School. Students who've had trouble in regular classes can complete their education through a packet program in the alternative school, located in a modular building separate from the rest of the campus. Students may also study there for the GED exam, and take the test elsewhere. Most prefer to earn a diploma. The building used to be across town, but the program moved on campus when the old building was condemned. In some ways, this works better, allowing students to move back and forth between the two schools. Through a reciprocal agreement with the Sheridan School District, the alternative school also serves students from the 250-student Sheridan High School about five miles away.

"Sometimes a change of scene, even from one district to another, is in the best interest of the student," said Yates.

Social Services. The school's new teen-parent program is a partnership among a local childcare provider, Adult and Family Services Division, and other public agencies that oversee child welfare. Babies receive childcare, but not on the campus. Their mothers may be in the regular school program, or the alternative program, or a mixture of the two.

"I guess flexibility is our middle name on that one," Yates said. "We get everyone together and see what's in the best interest given the individual circumstances. Mental Health counselor. Guidance counselor. Alternative-school teacher. Regular-program teachers. State agency reps. Student's parents. Some are technically homeless, not living with their natural parents. They might be living with a boyfriend or the boyfriend's folks. A whole bunch of different issues come into play."

Counselors and agency representatives do what they can to link these and other homeless students with services they need to continue their education. This may entail helping them find a living space, or arranging for private tutoring.

Students also have access to mental-health services and a county health clinic. A limited number of counseling hours are available, contracted by the district through a Newberg-based counseling service. Students may self-refer through the school's counselors or be referred by staff. Yates said the school needs funding for additional hours.

Students need parental permission to be seen by the nurse practitioner who staffs the County Health Clinic two-and-one-half days a week. State and county funding pays for another mental-health counselor a half day a week.

"It's a low-level doctor's office, sort of," said Yates. "In our area, there's a lack of adequate medical services that are close and affordable. There's one doctor in Sheridan.

"The big emphasis is on the prevention of teen parenthood. But we don't dispense birth control out of the clinic. We do pregnancy testing and refer students to the county or a physician if we find out they are sexually active. The school has nothing to do with it. It's a county program." An advisory committee of community and clergy helps set policy.

Support for Native Americans. Willamina has a significant Native American population. Most are members of the Grand Ronde Confederated Tribes, which owns and operates the Spirit Mountain Casino. The casino is about eight miles from the high school, and one of the district's two elementary schools is right in Grand Ronde. Administrators work with the tribal

leadership to provide programs, such as the tribal-youth-employment program. The tribe runs its own GED program. The school and the tribal leadership work cooperatively to find the placement that makes the most sense for each individual.

"We try to coordinate our services. We're working to get an office here on campus that they will staff a couple times a week. They come on campus regularly to meet with tribal youth in the Native American Club. It has about twenty-five to thirty members. Tribal members blend well here. There are very few kids that try to isolate themselves due to any ethnic differences. Race has not been an issue.

Woodburn High School

Woodburn School District, Woodburn

The arrival of two new assistant principals in fall 1994 coincided with the reduction in Woodburn's dropout rate for that school year. Principal John Lahley recognizes there may be some connection.

The school's dropout rate has been typically higher than the state average, due to its high percentage of migrantory people. In 1992-93 it was 11.8 percent, climbing to 15.8 percent the next year and settling back to 13.2 percent in 1994-95. Woodburn High School is unique in its ethnic mix. Sixty percent of its eight-hundred-and-fifty students are Hispanic, 18 percent are Russian, and 22 percent are Anglos.

"We like to say we're a majority minority school," said Lahley. "It's really busy and really interesting to be out and about on campus.

Focus on Discipline and Attendance. "The assistant principals took two tactics," Lahley recalled. "They changed the discipline procedure and they racheted down on the attendance policy so if you weren't at school, they were going to talk to your parents about why." Consequences kick in any time a student misses a class without a valid note from home. Students who return without a note can stay the day, but if they don't bring a note the next day, they're out until a conference with parents can be arranged.

"If parents get involved, you usually have more opportunity for a positive result. We've improved attendance and reduced dropouts with this. The key is that we've got two people committed and making it work out. If you don't have somebody gnawing at it all the time, you lose more kids."

Being on the block schedule makes one missed day count like two, so it's easy to get behind. But the school does make allowances for prearranged

absences, especially for doctor visits and, in the case of the Russian students, for Russian holidays.

English Transition Program. New this year is an English Transition Program modeled after one that's been successful in San Francisco; Pasco, Washington; and Texas.

"We have an awful lot of kids who are extremely bright in math or science or other courses and can communicate well in English, but if you get into a lengthy discussion, they get lost. For someone to comprehend a language fully takes five to seven years. In this program we try to take some things and break them down a little differently. We make the effort to teach classes in a little more understandable language.

One transition class is available in each of the core areas. These classes are taught in English, but students can ask for translations when they get in over their heads.

Alternative Programs. Six other alternative programs are available to meet students' varying needs: BLAST, PASS, ACE, Achieve, Woodburn Success, and the North Marion Achievement Center.

BLAST—Bulldog Academic Support Team. One teacher supervises this after-school program and one or two additional teachers usually volunteer to help out. The class serves as a resource for all other classes, with a prime focus on assisting students in completing assignments for their core classes. Students working independently through the PASS program can also come in to work or receive assistance.

PASS—Portable Assisted Secondary Studies. Students must pay for the packets that cover core courses and are purchased from California. Though expensive, this program has allowed some migrant students to earn credits they could not have earned otherwise.

ACE—Academic Court Education. This is an off-site court school for students who have a juvenile record, and have been expelled from the high school.

Achieve is a credit-retrieval program similar to the BLAST program but set up during the regular school day. At-risk students and returned dropouts qualify for participation.

Woodburn Success is an alternative school set up for students who have dropped out or been expelled and are identified gang members.

Finally, the *North Marion Achievement Center* is an offsite consortium that serves returning dropouts from four schools in the North County area.

Conclusion

Oregon's high schools have become more flexible. Educators no longer turn their backs on students who fail or are moving in that direction. They are dialoguing with students, parents, and their communities. What do you need to succeed? they are asking, and How can we give it to you?

Schools are breaking out of old molds, creating new programs to help students graduate with increased potential for lifelong success. Schedules have loosened up. Few, if any, schools insist that students attend all day. Block scheduling is common, and there's an openness to individual adaptations. Afternoon, evening, and alternative programs serve students whose circumstances don't mesh well with the regular school schedule.

Behavioral expectations are higher. Disciplinary crackdowns frequently increase the dropout rate in the short term. But students often return to a situation that better suits their needs. In response to deficits in personal and interpersonal skills traditionally taught in the home, many schools have developed curriculums to build self-esteem and teach skills in communication, problem-solving, and goal-setting. Counseling and other services are often available for students with complex problems such as teenage parenthood and substance abuse.

Recognition of students' diverse backgrounds, learning styles, and social needs is increasing. Schools are finding creative ways to pique student interest, applaud their successes, and make the school environment more user-friendly.

With these adaptations, former and potential dropouts in Oregon today probably have a better shot at success than at any time in the past.

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